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## **Affectivating environments in creative work**

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Creativity has been traditionally understood in psychology as an individual, cognitive process leading to the generation of notable, oftentimes revolutionary, creations. In this perspective of the phenomenon there is little space for an 'environment' or a 'world' outside the creator and also for affect outside of creative cognition. And yet this presentation will argue that processes of affectivating environments are situated at the core of creative production by means of *relating* creators to their context (the role of affect) and *activating* both creator and context through their relationship. Illustrations of these processes are offered from a study of craft creativity, more specifically the decoration of Easter eggs by Romanian folk artists in the historical region of Bucovina. Decorators learn their art through social interaction and observing their environment which is symbolically rich in ornaments commonly used for adorning houses, costumes, carpets, etc. This environment however is not only observed but 'lived' through by artisans, experienced emotionally since their work of decoration requires a strong bond with the materials and traditions specific for their community. Such a bond is primarily affective, not cognitive, as demonstrated by the fact that knowledge about the exact symbols of decoration is secondary to what artisans call 'working with soul', the quality of investing oneself into the artistic activity of decoration. This quality is considered in fact to be the characteristic feature of creativity by folk artists and a guarantee of their meaningful and experiential relation to the world surrounding them. Affectivating is consequently not only a process of constructing oneself through the world but also establishes the premise for constructing the world through the creative engagement of the self.

Keywords: creativity, experience, affect, craft, Egg decoration, affectivating environments

Bringing together creativity and affect, action, and environment is itself a creative type of association. This is hardly because creative expression is free of emotion, not manifested in action, and outside of an environment, but because the focus of the psychology of creativity has always been on the individual doing the creating and, 'inside' the individual, on cognitive mechanisms (Glăveanu, 2010). This is how creativity became closely associated with problem solving, divergent thinking, and insight, and discussed less in terms of emotions or environmental factors. The former portray creativity as an internal quality, the latter would make it relational. The essence of affect is to establish relationships between person and environment in ways that activate both and facilitate practical action. This stands at the core of the phenomenon described by Valsiner and Tateo (this symposium) as *affectivating environments*.

Conceived as a two-sided process, affectivating environments 'acts' both on the person and its environment resulting in dynamic cycles that effectively 'adapt' person to environment and environment to person. In addition, these cycles also foster growth and development and creativity as a process plays a leading role in this regard. However, in order to theorise creativity in relation to the phenomenon of affectivating environments, one would need to develop a new, cultural psychological vision of creativity, one that considers it not as a purely psychological, 'inner' process, but as an 'extended' one, *distributed* between person and its (material and social) environment. Such an 'extension' would be impossible to conceptualise outside affect and action and, consequently, it is hoped that the present paper can make two significant contributions: a) to the theory of creativity, leading to a theoretical integration of emotional and environmental aspects; and b) to our understanding of the recently proposed phenomenon of affectivating environments, a concept that, I will argue, should consider creative expression as both its engine and outcome. Illustrations for the above will be offered here from the case study of craft activities in villages of northern Romania.

### ***Creativity: where is the environment and where is affect?***

'Cutting' off creativity from affect and from the environment goes beyond a simple oversight and contributes to what can be called an ideology of creation in psychology and beyond. For centuries, at least since the Greek Antiquity, the emblematic image of the creator has been that of the *genius*. The genius is, by definition, a person of exceptional ability. The history of Western civilization 'located' the source of this ability either at the level of divine inspiration or, later on, the special genetic makeup of the creator. After Romanticism and the Enlightenment, two movements that exalted creativity in the

arts and sciences, respectively, the understanding of the genius in terms of great intellectual eminence and productivity became widespread (Weiner, 2000). This influenced psychologists whose interest in creativity, in the early decades of the last century, focused mostly on eminent creators and their psychological profile defined in terms of intelligence and personality. It is largely after the 1950s that an alternative view of creativity as a feature widely distributed in the population, a potential each of us has, came to the fore. This 'democratisation' of creativity however did not lead to its socialisation or, for this matter, to a theory that moves beyond cognition and personality.

Creativity researchers were aware of the fact that creators exist within an environment but the study of this environment was rarely on their agenda, except for when it was used to explain somehow the creative production of geniuses or very accomplished creators. Even in those cases the social environment was theorised as something external to the act of creation, something the person needed to 'fight' or struggle against in order to create. From bad childhood experiences (carefully analysed by those inclined towards psychoanalysis) to being confronted with a conforming society and having to go against old habits, norms and values in adulthood, the relationship between creative person and environment seemed difficult if not altogether counterproductive. This is how, after a survey of common definitions of creativity in psychology, Rhodes (1961) classified their focus under four P's: person, process, product, and press. The environment falls under the last category. 'Press' can be taken to suggest the 'pressing' nature of the external world, its demanding character and interminable list of constraints. Even more recent research developed within the 'social psychology of creativity' retains something of this original view and distrust towards the environment. In Amabile's (1996) extensive research programme, social factors (such as evaluation, reward, etc.) are shown very often to have a negative impact on intrinsic motivation and, consequently, on creative performance.

The story of affect in the psychology of creativity is even shorter. Since creativity was soon established as a mainly cognitive function, emotions were rarely considered to play a part in the process. It comes as no surprise that one of the most important questions for psychologists throughout the last century concerned the relationship between creativity and intelligence (Barron & Harrington, 1981). Scales developed for both allowed researchers to test their correlation in large populations. The conceptual quest was to demonstrate that intelligence and creativity are sufficiently different as not to represent the same construct. Luckily for creativity scholars, studies tend to confirm this, although the debate is not over yet. Under these circumstances, as was the case with the environment, emotions became

apparent when they disturbed the creative process, including in forms of pathology. This of course was not necessarily the view for all types of creativity and investigations of artistic creation, for instance, were generally more inclined to make room for affect, raising it to the status of a research variable (Botella, Zenasni & Lubart, 2011). Another great concern for researchers was to establish whether positive or negative mood generally accompany creative work and, in perspective, are conducive for it (see Shaw & Runco, 1994). When turned into a main focus, affect becomes tightly connected to cognition. Lubart and Getz (1997) discussed for example the role of endocepts (emotions attached to concepts and images stored in memory) for generating metaphors in creative thinking. Once more, the emotional is altogether internal rather than relational: emotional qualities that facilitate creative work create an 'aura' around concepts rather than objects and persons in the world outside.

In summary, to the question 'where is the environment and where is affect in the psychology of creativity?' the answer is: 'they are rarely included in the equation of creativity and, when they are acknowledged, it is either as external (environment) or internal (affect) variables, not relational constructs pointing to the interdependence between person and world'. To place the social environment completely outside of the person ends up not only individualising creativity but also making it exceptional, exclusive, essentialist. Locating affect only inside the person ends up either pathologising creative expression or reinforcing its cognitive dimension. In either case, there is little acknowledgment for affective transactions between person and environment, little space for processes of affectivating environments, something that, I will argue here, stands actually at the core of creativity. In order to understand this, however, we need first to consider creativity not as a trait, process, skill, attitude, aptitude, etc. but as a type of *experience in and of the world*.

### ***The experience of creating***

The cultural psychology of creativity starts from the premise that creative expression (as well as potential) is not a feature of the person, nor of the environment, but of the relationship between person and environment. Building on a vision of interdependence (Shweder, 1990), this orientation theorises creativity as a distributed process, simultaneously psychological, material, social and cultural (Glăveanu, 2010; Tanggaard, 2013). Instead of a 4 P framework, it operates with an expanded, 5 A's model that articulates creative actors, audiences, actions, artefacts, and affordances (Glăveanu, in press a). To create is not to engage in a cognitive process leading to the generation of new and useful products; it

means to act in the world from the position of a social actor, in relation to multiple audiences, in ways that exploit existing affordances in order to generate new artefacts that become integrated into micro or macro cultural systems. As a type of action, creativity coordinates a psychological and behavioural dynamic integrating cognition, affect and motivation, and both acts upon and is acted upon by the social and material environment. The two facets of affectivation are clearly present in creative acts: on the one hand, the creator transforms its environment in ways that have a strong affective resonance, on the other, the environment responds to this transformation in ways that trigger affective responses from the creator. This dynamic is also inscribed in the pragmatist understanding of *experience*, starting from the following basic consideration:

“The first consideration is that life goes on in an environment; not merely *in* it but because of it, through interaction with it. No creature lives merely under its skin; its subcutaneous organs are means of connection with what lies beyond its bodily frame, and to which, in order to live, it must adjust itself, by accommodation and defence but also by conquest. At every moment, the living creature is exposed to dangers from its surroundings, and at every moment, it must draw upon something in its surroundings to satisfy its needs. The career and destiny of a living being are bound up with its interchanges with its environment, not externally but in the most intimate way” (Dewey, 1934, p. 12).

As reflected above, John Dewey developed an account of experience that starts from the premise of the connection between person and environment. This relationship is marked by a fundamental dynamic between *acting* on the world and *undergoing* the reaction of the world to one’s action. For Dewey, our existence is marked by series of experiences in and of the world, triggered by confrontation with obstacles, originating in the impulsion to act, and ending in fulfilment. This is not however a romanticised vision of human life since experiences, marked by their emotional overtones, are both positive and negative. Even challenging life events lead us to an experience for as long as we undergo the effects of our actions and become aware of them, including of our impulsion to act and its goal. It is this very feature that offers human experience an *aesthetic quality* in Dewey’s view. Not by accident, therefore, he developed this account in relation to art and the work of artists. In his writing, art is not separated from everyday life in the way museums tend to present it today. The creation and perception of artistic outcomes are typical examples of what it means to have an experience, bringing together artist, material support and viewer in a triadic and inter-active relationship.

Dewey's conception offers us a good starting point for the development of a new perspective on creativity, one that focuses less on process, cognitive skills, personality traits or creative outcomes, and brings to the fore the notion of experience. Drawing on pragmatist sources, 'creativity as experience' is not about the subjective experience of creating (an interest for phenomenological approaches), but the *coordination* between subjective experience and action in the material and social world. The creative experience is grounded in the inter-active relationship between creator and environment and captured by iterative cycles of doing and undergoing, of acting and becoming aware of the consequences of one's action. *To creatively experience the world means to act in it in ways that affectivate one's environment.* All creative experiences, including the act of making (doing) and its perception (undergoing), have an emotional quality. In the words of Dewey, "the esthetic quality (...) rounds out an experience into completeness and unity as emotional" (Dewey, 1934, p. 43). What the construct of Valsiner and Tateo adds to this understanding is the premise that, once acted upon, environments become impregnated by aesthetic and emotional properties that, later on, 'act' on the creator and guide his/her subsequent actions. This re-action is possible precisely because of the relational nature of affect, reuniting subjective experience with environmental features and circumstances.

What does this mean for the *cultural psychology of creativity*? By considering creativity as experience we are able to recover and bring to the fore its emotional and environmental constituents. Moreover, this view places action at the centre of creativity and offers us a useful framework for its analysis: the dynamic between doing and undergoing. Being creative doesn't mean to act on concepts in the mind but to act in an embodied manner, engaging with the materiality and sociality of the environment:

"As we manipulate, we touch and feel, as we look, we see; as we listen, we hear. The hand moves with etching needle or with brush. The eye attends and reports the consequence of what is done. Because of this intimate connection, subsequent doing is cumulative and not a matter of caprice nor yet of routine. In an emphatic artistic-esthetic experience, the relation is so close that it controls simultaneously both the doing and the perception. Such vital intimacy of connection cannot be had if only hand and eye are engaged. When they do not, both of them, act as organs of the whole being, there is but a mechanical sequence of sense and movement, as in walking that is automatic. Hand and eye, when the experience is esthetic, are but instruments through which the entire living creature, moved and active throughout, operates. Hence the expression is emotional and guided by purpose" (Dewey, 1934, pp. 51-52).

### ***The creativity of craft***

The incipient formulation of this new model can be illustrated and developed with the help of a case study: the creativity of craft. This choice of topic is interesting from the perspective of creativity. On the surface, craft activities are, in contrast to high or fine art, marked by the expression of habit, repetition, and tradition. Are these the exact antithesis of creativity? A careful analysis of habitual action argues to the contrary (see Glăveanu, 2012). Grown out of deliberate exercises and guided forms of repetition, habits are a constitutive part of creative action and lead to new understandings of this phenomenon: the creator as a *masterful actor* in relation to the environment. There is creativity even in acts of copying (Ingold & Halam, 2007), since copying itself requires awareness of one's goal and the multiple adjustments needed to align the 'copy' to the 'original'. Equally, tradition and creativity are necessarily reunited in the fabric of social life. Any 'living' tradition incorporates creativity just as acts of creation are always, in one form or another, part of broader social and cultural traditions (Negus & Pickering, 2004). This dynamic is perfectly illustrated by craft activities. Crafts are more or less formalised occupations bringing together members of a community in their effort to produce material outcomes of symbolic and practical value. The products of craft are expressive of local identities and, in reusing existing cultural resources, contribute to the renewal of community life and its traditions. Moreover, crafts are learned typically from early ages through guided participation (Rogoff, 2003) and require a period of exercising the skills necessary to comply with several (often implicit) quality standards.

In addition to these characteristics, craft activities also have a pronounced aesthetic quality and many crafts are considered 'artistic', hence their classification as *folk arts*. One such folk art is represented by the decoration of eggs for Easter, a tradition specific for Christian communities and particularly Eastern European countries of Orthodox rite. Beyond this context, the practice of decorating eggs has ancient roots in many parts of the world, a ritual associated mostly with the creation of the world, spring, birth, and renewal (Marian, 1992). This symbolic background aided the Christian re-signification of this pagan practice in terms of the Resurrection; as such, the cross is one of the most common motifs depicted on Easter eggs and the dominant colour is red (symbolising life and rebirth). Today Easter eggs come in many shapes and sizes (different types of eggs are decorated from chicken, duck, goose, to pigeon and ostrich) and display a variety of motifs, geometric or figurative. Work techniques also vary, from the direct application of colour to the use of wax and other materials (leaves, beads, etc.). These elements individualise the craft in different parts of the world.





Figure 1. Romanian Easter eggs from the north of the country, Ciocănești village (Larisa Ujică)

In Romania, the decoration of Easter eggs is an old tradition specific for both urban and rural communities. In both settings, eggs are a central part of the Easter celebration, people knocking eggs against each other and saying 'Christ has Risen' and answering 'Indeed He has'. While in urban spaces eggs are typically coloured for the festivity, using artificial pigments (normally red but also other colours: yellow, blue, green and purple), the style of decoration is much more intricate in villages, particularly in the north of the country (Figure 1). The historical region of Bucovina, at the border with Ukraine, is a nationally and internationally recognised centre for this and other traditional craft activities (the making of wood carving, national costumes, religious paintings, etc.). Even within this region, marked on the whole by forms of geometric decoration, there is variability in terms of colours and motifs between villages (Gorovei, 2001). The rural community of Ciocănești, where I have conducted fieldwork in 2009-2010, is distinguished by the use of black as background colour and motifs depicted in yellow, red and white. The traditional work technique involves the use of wax in different stages of decoration. Initially the ornament is drawn on the egg in wax with the help of a special instrument called *chișiță* (the 'white stage'; Figure 2), then the egg is immersed in yellow and further details of the motifs are drawn in wax (the 'yellow stage'). Another immersion in colour, normally red, is followed by finalising the motifs in wax (the 'red stage') and, in the end, the egg is immersed in black (the background colour). When wax is whipped off near a heat source, the egg finally reveals its intended patterns and colours.



Figure 2. Drawing the motif in the 'white stage' of decoration (Valerica Jușcă)

This work procedure demonstrates the complexity of decorating eggs. To start with, decorators do not see the outcome of their work until the very end and rely on their knowledge of the craft to decide what to cover with wax at what stage of the process (whatever is drawn with wax as part of the motif will keep the colour it covered). There are considerable difficulties involved in embellishing a small, ovoid surface, something that becomes obvious in the work of novices who need some time to practice the position of the fingers on the egg and movement of the hand (Glăveanu, in press b). In addition, the result of this effort is uncertain. The fragility of eggs is well-known and this folk art can rightfully be considered an example of the *craftsmanship of risk* (Pye, 1968), an activity that confronts the artisan with the risk of failure at each moment. Moreover, professional decorators (mostly women) often say they work at night for hours during the winter, something that hurts their eyes and back. Under these circumstances one might wonder why they engage in this costly activity in the first place.

To understand this we need to consider decoration in terms of the creative experience described before. Using existing cultural resources, from material tools (work instruments and colour pigments, etc.) to signs (e.g. the motifs or patterns on the egg), artisans generate new and useful (appropriate) artefacts. They constantly generate novel ornaments as part of a process that is, at once, essentially free (due to the virtually infinite combinatorial possibilities) and highly constrained (by rules of association, size and

shape of the egg, previous work on the egg, and so on). Creative action in Easter egg decoration visibly relates creator and environment in a successive chain of exchanges. A detailed analysis of filmed sessions of decoration (see Glăveanu, in press b), in the work of folk artists of different ages, reveals this intricate texture of doing and (social and material) undergoing entailed by Easter egg making. The experience of creation in craft, in all its stages, is marked by different types of *affect*. From anticipation at the beginning, to enjoyment or frustration during work, up to excitement and surprise when wax is whipped off the egg, decoration involves considerable personal investment on the part of the artisan. This results in artefacts that are important for their creator and presented to others in the hope of eliciting the same kinds of emotion. The environment, 'affectivated' by creative work, extends well beyond Easter eggs, encompassing the work place and tools and, at a broader level, the material and symbolic space of the entire community, something we go on to discuss next.

### ***The affectivating environment of egg decoration***

Creativity, in the words of Barron, is no rootless flower (Barron, 1995). It grows out of an environment that has at least two characteristics: a) it contains material and symbolic resources that allow their combination and recombination with the aim of obtaining more or less novel outcomes, and b) it provides social support for creative expression, inscribed in existing norms and practices. The first feature leads to the accumulation of creative artefacts as part of a developing tradition; the second facilitates the creators' access to this tradition and encourages their participation within it. This is clearly the case in the rural community of Ciocănești, where Easter egg decoration has become in recent decades a defining custom. Not only is there a Museum of the Decorated Egg, the first one in the country, but the village also hosts an annual festival of decorated eggs, bringing together artisans from the region and the whole of Romania, as well as numerous national and international visitors. This social and cultural support is conducive for developing the craft and fostering a positive social identity for professional decorators. This can be noticed in the fact that children of young ages (even 5 to 7 years old), particularly in families with at least one decorator, tend to learn the craft and express a wish to continue it. Interestingly, the declared aim of artisans of all ages is to *continue* their tradition of decoration and there is great energy invested in keeping 'old' motifs and work techniques. At a practical level however, this continuity is impossible in the absence of *change*; as expressed by one of the participants, "even if I want to make a certain model, I still have to change something, it's like it is easier to change then to let everything be the same every time" (Livia Balacian).

All these defining practical features of decoration are reflected by the wider environment: the houses in the village, national costumes, wood carving and the ornamenting of tools, carpets, etc. This environment, in its materiality, is both an abundant source and outcome of creative activities. In essence, its objects are *dynamic records* of collective creativity: they capture the interest and investment of the artisans while inspiring new developments of the craft and being open to (re)interpretation by both artisans and outside visitors. This resonance between past and future is doubled by another one between different craft traditions. It has long been noticed by ethnographers (Zahacinschi & Zahacinschi, 1992) that, in Romania, folk artistic expression, in its great diversity (supported, in the past centuries, by a vibrant rural life), is surprisingly unitary. This unity relates primarily to ornaments and researchers of craft objects from the country, in different regions and across different practices, can easily observe similarities at the level of graphic depiction and (to a lesser degree, due to increased possibilities of interpretation) of symbolic meaning.



Figure 3. Decorated houses in Ciocănești (here the museum house of Leontina Țăran)

Considering egg decoration alone, Gorovei (2001) listed an impressive number of 291 distinctive motifs and patterns. Examples of frequent motifs include: the Cross (of the lamb, Easter Cross, Russian Cross, etc.), the sun and stars, the stork's beak, the ram's horns, the frog's mouth or foot, the horse's hoof, the raven's feather, the cock's tail, the rabbit's ear, the belt of Virgin Mary, the "lost way", the shepherd's

hook, the plough's teeth, the convent, the chariot's wheel, etc. Many of them, specific for the entire Romanian folk art, are drawn usually in a simplified – often geometric – manner, suggesting rather than depicting their referent. The village of Ciocănești reflects this geometrism in the decoration of eggs but also of houses. The local custom of ornamenting houses started almost half a century ago and transformed the village, nowadays recognised as an 'open air museum' (see Figure 3). This *heavily ornamented environment* is shaped by the villagers' aim to display and maintain their traditions, to shape their living space in accordance to their art and knowledge of the world.

Such a sustained activity is very much reflective of processes of affectivating environments: they 'extend' the person into the world and make the latter a familiar place, 'populated' by cultural signs with great affective value. At the same time, the environment 'acts' on creators by being a constant remainder of local crafts and traditions, a support for their identity and a continuous source of new material. In interviews decorators often mention getting ideas simply by looking around them, noticing the decoration of their homes or of other houses in the village. Sometimes this is done quickly, while crossing the village on a bike and, when a new idea comes, the artisan needs to hurry home and put it down on paper in order to keep it 'safe'. These episodes reinforce the emotional connection to their community, allowing environment not only to be 'affectivated' but to 'affectivate', in turn, the self and open it towards new creative experiences.

### ***'Working with soul': Creffectivating self and environment***

An interesting observation made by artisans when commenting on their work and the work of others refers to 'decorating with soul'. This expression is meant to distinguish between those who work more or less in a mechanical manner, learning a few motifs and repeating them on as many eggs as possible in order to sell them later for profit; in contrast, 'true' craftsmen invest themselves into their work, are knowledgeable of tradition, participate in it and develop an emotional connection to it. At a practical level, this distinction is reflected in different styles of decoration. 'Working with soul' is typical for those who use the traditional technique with wax, the marker of a craftsmanship of risk (Pye, 1968) described earlier. This procedure essentially requires time and skill as well as an acute awareness of one's action and its effect – the undergoing that gives shape to the experience of decoration. People who simply apply stickers on coloured eggs, in a hurry, lack the 'soul' quality of their work. They are not seen as contributing to the tradition in a meaningful way, not necessarily due to lack of skill but of interest and

emotional connection to the craft. Even when living in environments built through processes of affectivation, they are not able to fully participate in them.

‘Working with soul’ is, in this context, the very sign of *creaffectivating both self and environment*. In any creative experience, a double construction of self and world takes place. This co-evolution steams from establishing an affective relationship with one’s work, its outcomes, and the environment that facilitates and receives them. In egg decoration, creaffectivation transforms the environment, turning it into a universe of available cultural resources, and the person, who expresses his/her own sensibility (‘soul’) in the process of becoming a masterful decorator. There are several theoretical and practical implications deriving from this conclusion. At a practical level, it suggests that stimulating creativity is not something achieved by focusing on the person alone (i.e. personality traits or thinking skills in isolation) but by reflecting on the relation between person and environment. The affective nature of this relationship needs further study and theoretical elaboration. If creativity is primarily an experience of and in the world, the unit of analysis in the psychology of creativity becomes the ‘person in context’. In this sense, affectivating the environment is always a form of creaffectivating it with deep implications for self and world. In the end, it is only relationships that can be described as active, affective and also creative.

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